

## Yellow Sea Turning Red: Darker Views of China among South Koreans

**WOO Jung-Yeop**  
**Leif-Eric EASLEY**

Next year marks the 20th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Seoul and Beijing in 1992. In two decades, South Korea and China have made vast improvements -- in quantitative and qualitative terms -- to the bilateral relationship. However, since the serious security incidents involving North Korea in 2010, relations between Seoul and Beijing have been strained. Blood spilt in the Yellow Sea is coloring South Korean public opinion, and views of China have turned decidedly negative.

The downward trend of South Korean public opinion is likely to be exacerbated by the most recent incident involving Chinese fishermen in South Korea's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). On December 12, a Chinese fishing boat captain, in the process of being detained for illegal fishing, allegedly killed a South Korean coast guard officer. The involved Chinese fishermen are now in South Korean custody, awaiting a legal process that will be sensitive for diplomatic relations between Seoul and Beijing.

This report details how South Korean public perceptions of China have changed in the past year based on polls conducted by the Asan Institute for Policy Studies. The analysis suggests that events surrounding the sinking of the Cheonan and the shelling of Yeonpyeong Island by North Korea in 2010 are having a lasting effect on South Korean public opinion. This article considers the significance of changing Korean views within the regional geopolitical context and concludes with a pessimistic outlook for South Korean opinion of China in light of the political calendar for the upcoming year.

### *Progress After Normalization*

Trade volume between South Korea and China has grown almost continuously since normalization, increasing nearly 30-fold since 1992. Trade volume between the two countries was about 63 billion USD in 1992 and dramatically increased to 1884 billion USD by 2010. This trade volume surpassed South Korea's 2010 trade volume with the United States (902 billion USD) and Japan (925 billion USD) combined. It is estimated by the Federation of Korean Industries that investment by South Koreans has created more than 2.8 million jobs in China.

Among South Koreans studying overseas (more than 250,000), about 29.8% (about 75,000) are studying in North America and about 25.5% (about 65,000) are studying in China.

In China, South Korean films, dramas and pop-music have become tremendously popular, and more and more young Chinese are adopting the clothing and hairstyles of South Korean entertainers. This popular phenomenon is known as the “Korean Wave.”

Public opinion has generally reflected the positive evolution of relations between South Korea and China. In the years since Seoul and Beijing normalized relations, South Korean views of China became more positive. In a public opinion poll conducted in January 1993, shortly after the establishment of diplomatic relations, 44.0% of Koreans said that China is the country that Korea should have good diplomatic relations with in order to achieve reunification. The U.S. (20.7%), Russia (15.9%), and Japan (8.1%) followed.

Another poll in September 1993, also showed that Koreans did not consider China a significant threat to Korea even though it was less than a year after normalization. In that poll, North Korea (43.5%) and Japan (15.0%) were considered greater threats than China (4.0%). In a similar poll in 1994, few South Koreans were concerned about the rise of China. Asked about which country will pose a threat to the peace and the stability of Asia-Pacific region, North Korea was ranked first with 42.7% and Japan followed with 36.5%. China was ranked third with 23.9%. China was thus considered more peaceful than Japan.

In a similar poll in 2004, the relationship with China was considered of greater priority by Koreans than those with other countries. In economic terms, China was identified as the most important country by 61.6% of Koreans, followed by the U.S. with 26.2%. In diplomatic and security aspects, China was again picked as the most important country with 48.3%, followed by the U.S. with 38.1%. This trend of prioritizing China continued until 2010, and as economic ties between South Korea and China strengthened, many South Koreans came to believe that China would be on their side. Or at least South Koreans believed China would be even-handed in matters of inter-Korean affairs. However, these beliefs evaporated after two dramatic national security events last year.

### *Worsening South Korean Opinions of China*

After North Korea’s sinking of the South Korean Navy corvette Cheonan in March 2010, which killed 46 sailors, China blocked inclusion of any term or phrase that would have had the United Nations Security Council point directly to North Korea as the culprit. The Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson called on countries involved to take a “cautious and appropriate approach” in seeking UNSC intervention. The position China took after the Cheonan incident and its role in the UN Security Council was disappointing to many Koreans. At that time, however, China could hide behind the controversy over the validity of a multinational investigation that uncovered evidence implicating North Korea.

North Korea’s shelling of Yeonpyeong Island in November 2010 presented no such ambiguity over responsibility. North Korea fired approximately 170 artillery shells and rockets at Yeonpyeong, hitting both military and civilian targets. The shelling caused widespread damage on the island, killing four South Koreans, including two civilians, and

injuring 19. Beijing responded with statements along the lines of “as the Korean Peninsula situation is highly complicated and sensitive, all parties concerned should stay calm and exercise restraint.” Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi explicitly said that China would not side with either Seoul or Pyongyang on the matter of North Korea’s shelling of Yeonpyeong Island. “As a responsible country, China decides its position based on the merits of each case and does not seek to protect any side,” Yang said in a speech at an international forum in Beijing. That statement reiterated China’s initial stance that all parties concerned should keep calm and exercise restraint. In the eyes of many South Koreans, not blaming and punishing a criminal is the same as defending the criminal.

South Koreans were deeply disappointed in the Chinese response. The annual survey of the Asan Institute for Policy Studies revealed that public sentiment toward China significantly worsened. In 2010, the annual survey was conducted (nation-wide, among 2,000 South Korean adults over age 19 in face-to-face interviews) from August 16 to October 5, which was after the Cheonan sinking but before the Yeonpyeong shelling. The 2011 Asan annual survey was conducted from September 1 to October 10 (2,000 Korean adults over age 19; mixed mode survey: face-to-face interviews and email contact), after the effects of both attacks could be reflected in public opinion.

When asked who is responsible for the current tensions between the two Koreas, in 2010 only 4.1% of respondents picked China. In 2011, the share rose to 9.3%. The Asan annual survey also asked which country is the second most responsible for current tensions between the two Koreas. Since most South Koreans said that North Korea is the most responsible, it is important to see which country respondents picked as the second most responsible for tensions. 36.6% of respondents in 2010 picked China as the second most responsible country, but that number rose to 45.0% in 2011. An increasing number of South Koreans associate China with fraught relations between the two Koreas.

After the series events in 2010, South Koreans turned toward having a more negative view of China in general. When asked whether the respondent thinks China will intervene on behalf of North Korea in the event of war between two Koreas, 60.1% of respondents said that it was likely in 2010. However, in 2011, 71.0% of Koreans said it was likely. Clearly, more South Koreans came to believe that China is on North Korea’s side. When asked which country will pose the biggest threat to a unified Korea, 62.9% of Koreans picked China, followed by Japan with 21.2%.

### *Changing Views on Foreign Policy*

Considering the historical animosity between Korea and Japan (reflected in poll results in the 1990s), these results pointing to China as a greater security threat than Japan in the minds of South Koreans show how increasingly negative views about China have become. Surprisingly, about 55% of South Koreans now say that an ROK-Japan military alliance will be necessary to balance the rise of China. This kind of public opinion supporting a relationship with the Japanese military was previously unimaginable in Korean society.

There is no doubt that history with Japan remains controversial for many Koreans. For example, during the recent October 2011 campaign for the Seoul mayoral by-election, the candidate from the ruling Grand National Party, Ms. Na Kyung-won, was heavily criticized by segments of the public because she attended an event commemorating the 50-year anniversary of the Japan Self-Defense Forces in 2004. Another recent example showing Korean sensitivities over Japan was the public uproar in April 2008 related to President Lee Myung-bak bowing to Japan's Akihito and addressing him as emperor. Koreans usually refuse to call Akihiko "emperor" despite this being his Japanese title, because Koreans do not want to lend any legitimacy to Japan's past colonization of the Korean Peninsula. Despite such enduring historical sensitivities, the Korean public has started to contemplate a military alliance with Japan to balance the rise of China because the public increasingly perceives China as taking North Korea's side. The Cheonan and Yeonpyeong incidents have thus had effects on Korean views of foreign policy far beyond inter-Korean relations.

Various poll results since 1993 suggested that the South Korean public held positive expectations and favorable attitudes about China, but the Asan annual surveys of 2010 and 2011 suggest that expectations and attitudes have turned negative beyond short-term considerations. South Koreans now seem to broadly believe that China's interest in the Korean peninsula is not in accordance with that of South Korea. In a follow-up poll conducted by the Asan Institute in November 2011, (1,000 South Korean adults over age 19; mobile phone interviews), 81.7% of Koreans responded that China does not want reunification of the two Koreas.

### *China's Different Strategic Interests*

Despite a host of ameliorating factors that guard against further deterioration in South Korea-China ties, relations between Seoul and Beijing are complicated by incongruent national interests. The ameliorating factors include how trade flows and private exchanges between South Korea and China outpace those between China and North Korea. Officials from Seoul and Beijing have more interaction at international fora such as the G-20, South Korea-Japan-China ministerial meetings, and the Asia-Europe meeting. South Korea is expanding the number of diplomatic missions it maintains in China and is increasing the number of officials and research staff focused on China. Even military dialogues and exchanges between South Korea and China are increasing. But these efforts to shore up the bilateral relationship are largely off the public's radar.

Seoul and Beijing will have difficulty repairing and strengthening their "strategic partnership" if the two countries' strategic goals remain far apart. Policy analysts generally point to different views of North Korea (including the ultimate goal of unification) and the role of the ROK-U.S. alliance as the sticking points in relations between Seoul and Beijing. Despite increasing economic integration with South Korea, Japan, the U.S. and other countries, Chinese leaders' strong preference for maintaining stability in the region appears to prioritize the status quo with North Korea, even if it involves costs in diplomatic relations

with China's larger trading partners.

The Chinese military allegedly prefers to keep U.S. forces on the other side of a strategic buffer. After the Cheonan and Yeonpyeong incidents, China heavily criticized the ROK-U.S. military exercise in the Yellow Sea off the west coast of the Korean Peninsula. In November last year, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Hong Lei said in a statement that China opposes any party engaging in military activity in China's exclusive economic zone without its permission.

What is more, Chinese strategists do not want to share a border with a unified Korea that is a strong ally of the United States. Chinese policymakers also worry about an influx of refugees and spiraling uncertainty in case of a North Korean collapse. This is why Beijing tends to shield North Korea from pressure that might destabilize the regime, even while it does not want Pyongyang to make provocations that might lead to conflict between two Koreas and ultimately involve the United States in hostilities.

### *More Difficulties Ahead*

Within this strategic context, there are numerous diplomatic and political factors that apply downward pressure on South Korean views of China. Beijing's deliberate separation of China-DPRK relations from the issues of North Korean nuclear weapons development and conventional military provocations irks many in South Korea. Despite Pyongyang's flagrant claims about its Highly Enriched Uranium (HEU) program, Beijing does not demand the level of serious commitment from North Korea on denuclearization that Seoul requires.

What is more, China is unwilling or unable to make North Korea repent for its 2010 attacks in order to re-start the Six-party Talks on denuclearization. Beijing has made pronouncements about the importance of improving inter-Korean relations, but has not elicited Pyongyang's cooperation with Seoul, even on less-controversial humanitarian issues such as food and medical aid, separated family reunions, and repatriations of remains.

Meanwhile, China's ties with North Korea are expanding apace. These include three trips by Kim Jong Il to China since May 2010, and high-level exchanges between the militaries and ruling parties. China and North Korea have been commemorating various historical anniversaries, including those related to the Korean War and 50 years since the signing of the China-DPRK Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance. Pyongyang appears to have received Beijing's blessing for North Korean hereditary leadership succession, as well as solidarity on security issues.

Beyond diplomatic theater, China and North Korea have advanced numerous agreements regarding trade, infrastructure and investment in the past year. China and North Korea's joint economic projects are of concern to South Korea in terms of Beijing's implementation of UN nuclear sanctions, implications for North Korean economic reform, and whether China's economic influence in North Korea is coming at South Korea's expense.

According to the Korea International Trade Association, South Korea's trade with North Korea has likely fallen to half that of China's, from a level of approximately 90% in 2007.

With South Korean National Assembly and presidential elections upcoming in 2012, the ROK electoral landscape is complicated, and public opinion can affect the direction of foreign policy. Already, fear of dependence on China may have provided tailwinds for ratification of the Korea-U.S. Free Trade Agreement. Even though many politicians in the opposition parties, as well as some in the ruling party, believe that ROK foreign policy may now be too closely aligned with Washington, there is little electoral advantage to be gained by looking soft on China. This is especially true when public opinion of China may continue to worsen given bilateral disputes such as the fishing incident on December 12, 2011.

After the Chinese fishing boat captain who allegedly killed a South Korean coast guard officer was brought under South Korean custody, China continued its pattern of calling for restraint. China's foreign ministry spokesman, Liu Weimin, said China is "willing to work with South Korea closely on this matter, [but] hopes the South Korean side will protect the legitimate rights of Chinese fishermen and treat them humanely." It appears that some Chinese apology or show remorse about the loss of South Korean life will be forthcoming, but South Korean public opinion will likely hinge on the extent to which Beijing is seen to respect Seoul's justice for the fishermen. Moreover, without coordinated enforcement of fishing rights, it is only a matter of time before the two sides face another incident at sea.

Finally, the clock is ticking down to Pyongyang's next provocation. North Korea aims to become a *Gangseong Daeguk* ("strong and prosperous nation") by 2012, the 100th anniversary of the birth of North Korea's founder, Kim Il Sung. Given the patently disastrous condition of the North Korean economy and human welfare, there is no way North Korea will be a prosperous country by next year. This leaves North Korea's current leader, Kim Jong Il, and his son and chosen successor, Kim Jong Un, with the option of propagandizing about North Korea's resolute and brave opposition to perceived external threats. In other words, the North Korean regime has reasons of domestic legitimacy to show strength and resolve by again attacking South Korea.

It remains to be seen how enduring the effects of the Cheonan and Yeonpyeong attacks will be for South Korean public opinion. But the observed change in who South Koreans believe their friends are is clearly more than a blip in the polls. Chinese leaders have their work cut out for them if they want to regain trust in Seoul. Many South Korean and international observers believe that only China has the ability to rein in North Korea, and yet the political calendar suggests Pyongyang has domestic political incentives to make new provocations in 2012. Unless Beijing is prepared to respond responsibly in the eyes of the world, it is to be expected that the gap of perception between South Korea and China will be widened further. Negative opinions of China stand to influence South Korean foreign policy and strategic calculations going forward.



\* The views expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the views of the Asan Institute for Policy Studies

---



**WOO Jung-Yeop** ([woo@asaninst.org](mailto:woo@asaninst.org)) is a research fellow at the Asan Institute for Policy Studies. He earned his B.A. in business administration from Seoul National University, M.P.P. from Georgetown University, and Ph.D. in political science from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. Prior to joining Asan, he was a postdoctoral fellow at the Korean Studies Institute within the University of Southern California. He was also an associate analyst for Gallup Korea and the Korean Research Company. His areas of specialty include foreign military intervention in civil wars and the relationship between foreign policy-making and public opinion.



**Leif-Eric EASLEY** ([easley@asaninst.org](mailto:easley@asaninst.org)) is Assistant Professor in the Division of International Studies at Ewha University and a Research Fellow at the Asan Institute for Policy Studies. At Ewha, Professor Easley teaches international security and political economics. His research interests include contested national identities and changing levels of trust in the bilateral security relationships of Northeast Asia. He received his Ph.D. and M.A. from Harvard University's Department of Government and was the Northeast Asian History Fellow at the Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center (APARC) at Stanford University. Professor Easley is involved in high-level U.S.-Asia exchanges (Track II diplomacy) with the Asan Institute and the Pacific Forum-Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS).